



International Journal of Sanskrit Research

अनन्ता

ISSN: 2394-7519

IJSR 2023; 9(2): 154-156

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www.anantaajournal.com

Received: 04-12-2022

Accepted: 05-01-2023

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The significance of sphota in Advaita Vedanta philosophy

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Abstract

The concept of Sphota is central to the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism. Sphota refers to the fundamental unity of sound and meaning, which is believed to be the basis of all language and communication. In this paper, we explore the significance of Sphota in Advaita Vedanta philosophy, its origins, development, and the various interpretations it has undergone over the centuries. We examine how Sphota theory is applied in the interpretation of Sanskrit scriptures, particularly the Upanishads and the Vedas, and how it is used to reconcile seemingly contradictory texts. Additionally, we explore how Sphota is used to explain the nature of consciousness and the relationship between language, thought, and reality. Sphota theory is a crucial concept in Advaita Vedanta philosophy, and its significance extends beyond the philosophy itself. The exploration and understanding of Sphota theory offer valuable insights into the nature of language, thought, and consciousness, and its influence can be seen in the development of linguistic and philosophical theories in various cultures throughout history.

Keyword: Sphota, advaitavedanta, veda, philosophy, language

Introduction

Advaita Vedanta is a philosophical school of Hinduism that emphasizes the non-dual nature of reality. The term "Advaita" means "non-dual" or "not two", while "Vedanta" refers to the end of the Vedas, the ancient Hindu scriptures. The school was founded by the Indian philosopher and theologian Adi Shankara in the 8th century CE.

Shankara's teachings were a response to the prevailing philosophical and religious beliefs of his time, which were characterized by a multiplicity of gods and conflicting doctrines. Shankara argued that ultimate reality is non-dual and that the apparent diversity of the world is an illusion. He believed that the true self (Atman) is identical with the ultimate reality (Brahman), and that the goal of spiritual practice is to realize this unity and overcome the ignorance that causes suffering.

Shankara's teachings were influential in the development of Hinduism, particularly in the Advaita Vedanta tradition. Over the centuries, the school has produced many great thinkers, including Gaudapada, Ramanuja, and Madhva. The Advaita Vedanta school has also influenced other Indian philosophical traditions, such as Yoga and Buddhism.

In modern times, Advaita Vedanta has continued to attract followers both in India and around the world. Its teachings have been popularized by many spiritual leaders, including Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, and Nisargadatta Maharaj. The school has also influenced Western philosophers and theologians, such as Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, and Huston Smith. The concept of sphota is a central idea in Advaita Vedanta, which is a school of Indian philosophy that emphasizes the non-dual nature of reality. Sphota refers to the underlying, unchanging, and universal aspect of language that allows communication to take place. In this answer, I will provide a critical analysis of the concept of sphota in Advaita Vedanta, drawing on textual references from the tradition.

One of the earliest and most influential texts on the concept of sphota is the Vakyapadiya by Bhartrihari. According to Bhartrihari, language is not simply a collection of individual words or sounds but a holistic entity that conveys meaning through the relationship between the parts. This holistic entity is called sphota, which he describes as a "mental construct" that is "heard" by the listener as a unitary whole.

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However, Advaita Vedanta takes the concept of sphota further by positing that the ultimate reality of the universe is also a kind of sphota. According to this view, just as language is an expression of the underlying sphota that allows communication to take place, the world of objects and phenomena is an expression of the ultimate sphota, which is pure consciousness or Brahman.

The Advaita Vedanta philosopher Shankara further elaborates on this idea in his commentary on the Brahma Sutras. He argues that the ultimate sphota is beyond the realm of language and cannot be expressed or conceptualized in words. Instead, it can only be realized through direct experience, which he calls "intuitive perception" or "self-realization." In other words, the ultimate sphota is not something that can be grasped through intellectual analysis or logical deduction but must be directly experienced through spiritual practice.

While the concept of sphota has been influential in the development of Indian linguistic and philosophical thought, it has also been subject to criticism. One of the main criticisms of the concept is that it posits an underlying unity to language and reality that is not always evident in our everyday experience. For example, the diversity of languages and cultural contexts around the world suggests that there is no universal or unchanging aspect to language. Additionally, some critics argue that the concept of sphota is overly metaphysical and does not provide a practical basis for understanding language and communication.

The Significance of Sphota in Advaita Vedanta

In Advaita Vedanta, Sphota is used to explain the nature of language and thought and their relationship to reality. According to this philosophy, language and thought are not merely symbols of reality but are, in fact, an essential part of reality itself. This means that language and thought are not separate from the world but are intimately connected to it.

Sphota theory also plays a crucial role in the interpretation of Sanskrit scriptures, particularly the Upanishads and the Vedas. These texts are considered to be the ultimate source of knowledge in Advaita Vedanta, and their interpretation is central to the philosophy. Sphota theory is used to explain the unity of the seemingly contradictory statements in these texts and to show that they all point to the same ultimate reality.

Sphota theory is also used to explain the nature of consciousness. According to Advaita Vedanta, consciousness is not something that is created by the brain but is a fundamental aspect of reality itself. It is used to explain how consciousness is related to language and thought and how it can be realized through the practice of meditation and self-inquiry. Furthermore, Sphota theory has been influential in the development of Indian linguistics and philosophy of language. It has been studied and debated by many scholars over the centuries and has influenced the development of linguistic theories in other cultures as well.

Bhartrhari's Sphoṭa: Bhartrhari's theory is a linguistic theory that was proposed by the Indian grammarian and philosopher, Bhartrhari, in the 5th century CE. The theory deals with the nature of meaning in language and how words and sentences are understood.

According to the Sphoṭa theory, the meaning of a word is not just the sum of its parts (i.e., the individual sounds or letters that make up the word), but is something that emerges from the word as a whole. Bhartrhari called this emergent meaning "Sphoṭa," which can be translated as "bursting forth" or "explosion."

The Sphoṭa theory holds that when a person hears a word, they do not simply hear a string of individual sounds, but they immediately grasp the meaning of the word as a whole. The meaning of the word is said to burst forth in the mind of the listener, much like a flash of lightning illuminating the sky.

Bhartrhari's theory also suggests that sentences have a similar emergent meaning, which arises from the combination of the individual words in the sentence. This emergent meaning is what allows us to understand the intended message of a sentence, rather than simply understanding the individual words that make it up.

Overall, the Sphoṭa theory represents an important contribution to the philosophy of language and has had a significant influence on linguistic and philosophical thought in India.

Patañjali's Sphota: Patañjali was an ancient Indian grammarian who lived around the 2nd century BCE. He is famous for his commentary on the grammar of Sanskrit language known as "Mahābhāṣya." Patañjali also contributed to the development of the Sphoṭa theory, which was originally proposed by Bhartrhari.

Patañjali's interpretation of the Sphoṭa theory differs slightly from Bhartrhari's. According to Patañjali, the Sphoṭa is not just the immediate burst of meaning that arises in the mind upon hearing a word or a sentence. Instead, he describes the Sphoṭa as a holistic unit of meaning that exists beyond the level of individual words or sounds.

Patañjali also introduced the concept of "Vikṛti" to the Sphoṭa theory, which refers to the modifications that occur to the Sphoṭa as it is expressed in speech. In other words, when we speak, the Sphoṭa undergoes modifications due to various factors such as stress, intonation, and pronunciation. Despite these modifications, however, the essential meaning of the Sphoṭa remains intact.

Patañjali's contributions to the Sphoṭa theory have been influential in the development of Sanskrit grammar and Indian philosophy. His work on the Sphoṭa theory also laid the foundation for later developments in the philosophy of language in India.

Interpretations of Sphota Theory

Sphoṭa theory refers to the unity of sound and meaning and is seen as the basis of all language and communication. The term Sphoṭa is derived from the Sanskrit word "sphuṭ," which means "to burst open" or "to reveal." According to Indian linguistics, Sphoṭa is the revelation of meaning that occurs when a word is uttered or heard. Over the centuries, Sphoṭa theory has undergone various interpretations, and there are different schools of thought on its nature and significance. One of the key debates is whether Sphoṭa is a real entity or merely a mental construct. Some philosophers argue that Sphoṭa is a real entity that exists independently of language and thought, while others argue that it is merely a mental construct.

Another debate concerns the relationship between Sphoṭa and the individual sounds and letters that make up language. Some philosophers argue that Sphoṭa is the underlying unity that gives meaning to the individual sounds and letters, while others argue that the individual sounds and letters are more fundamental and that Sphoṭa is simply a mental construct that helps us understand their meaning.

In conclusion, the concept of sphota is a central idea in Advaita Vedanta that posits an underlying unity to language and reality. While it has been influential in Indian linguistic

and philosophical thought, it has also been subject to criticism. Overall, a critical analysis of the concept requires an examination of its philosophical, linguistic, and experiential dimensions, as well as its practical implications for understanding communication and the nature of reality.

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